

Attacking Ukrainian grain port and blowing up a POW barrack: mere brutality, or thought-out messaging?



Olenivka's POW camp destroyed

by Lev Tsitrin

When I was a kid, non-Russian speech had a fascinatingly baffling effect on me. Clearly, it was gibberish – and yet, miracle of miracles – the interlocutors of a person who spoke that gibberish behaved as if it made sense! Only as I grew up I learned that those people were indeed exchanging information – though I could be no privy to it. I could watch people speak, and yet had no clue whatsoever as to what was being said. Though done in full view, the conversation was secret, its contents discernible only to those who knew the language.

Two recent events in the Ukraine war – Russia's rocketing of

the port of Odessa the day after it signed an agreement to allow Ukrainians to transport grain from that port to the countries facing starvation, and the blast in Russia-administered POW camp that killed scores of Ukrainians held there, may look like so many other random acts of war-time violence, and are indeed presented to us this way – but they may well mask something else – messages made in a language we, thankfully, are not used to, and don't understand.

The deadly blast in Olenivka's POW camp was instantly blamed by Russia on the Ukrainians: "Russia's defense ministry said in a daily briefing on Friday that Ukraine had used an American-made advanced rocket system to strike the prison, aimed at sending a cautionary warning to Ukrainian soldiers who might be considering surrendering to Russian forces. Ukrainian officials called those accusations absurd, charging that Russia caused the carnage to cover up atrocities they had committed at the prison. "Russian occupiers are pursuing their criminal goals, accusing Ukraine of committing war crimes, while hiding the torture and shooting of prisoners," the Ukrainian general staff said in a statement," according to the [New York Times](#).

And indeed, Ukrainians do have a point. In order to effect the allegedly-attempted intimidation of its own troops, Ukraine would have to openly acknowledge that it carried out the strike as a matter of deliberate policy – but given that the prisoners were the defenders of Mariupol's Azovstal plant who are considered heroes by the Ukrainians, and who surrendered on the express order of the Ukrainian government in coordination with the Red Cross, this rationale for targeting them is impossible to believe in – cowards will not be intimidated into bravery by watching true heroes being executed for obeying orders. On the other hand, Russian explanation may be a classic case of projection of Russia's own war-time *modus operandi* on the Ukrainians. WW2 witnessed the use of what Russians called "zagradotr'yadi" – literally

translated, “blocking forces” – units of machine gunners positioned behind the attacking Soviet forces, and shooting anybody who retreats, thus leaving the troops no alternative but to advance. I heard the mention of the same tactic being used by the Russians in the Ukraine war, too.

The *New York Times* (like everyone else) finds the blast puzzling. “Because the Azov fighters were considered high value prisoners, it was unclear why Russia would want to kill them. In a statement, General Budanov [the commander of Ukraine’s military intelligence service] offered one possible explanation, saying the attack appeared to have been carried out by Russian mercenaries acting outside the regular chain of command. The Russian defense ministry, he said, appeared to have been caught by surprise and forced to make justifications for the attack after the fact.”

But there could be a different explanation here, too. Given that Russians, like Iranians, don’t hesitate to engage in “hostage diplomacy” and play hardball with those they arrest on flimsy charges (witness State Department’s attempts to get the release of Americans Brittney Griner and Paul Whelan from Russian custody, offering in return to release a notorious Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout who is serving twenty five years in the US), why can’t the Olenivka blast be a message to the Ukrainians, in a not-so-subtle language of hostage-takers: “we have your guys in custody and, if you keep hitting us, we’ll kill them”? The Westerners may perhaps be too civilized to recognize the message even when they see it – because they don’t know this language of unsentimental, hard-nosed, hostage-taking brutality.

Likewise, the surprising rocketing of Odessa by the Russians – surprising because it happened the day after Russia signed the grain export deal with Ukraine, may also be a message in disguise rather than a mere exercise in senseless, brute force. The 120-day period negotiated in the deal, which allowed Ukrainians to transport their grain from Odessa and

nearby ports to Turkey has a major unspoken assumption: that for the next four months, Odessa will still be Ukrainian, and the Black Sea waters adjoining it, will still be Ukrainian territorial waters. Needless to say, acknowledging this, no matter how indirectly, was a bitter pill to the Russians. Hence, right upon signing the deal, they sent Ukrainians a message via the rockets that hit Odessa: "don't get ideas. As far as we are concerned, Odessa is Russian, and we'll keep pushing to make it so, deal or no deal."

War puts combatants into a state of nature that is the very opposite of a civilized conduct and imposes its own language that is incomprehensible to a peaceful person. The language is that of intimidation; it is spoken through death and destruction. I wonder whether Odessa and Olenivka are just Russian's messages spoken in this language – unperceived as such by the press, but, nevertheless, conveying perfectly rational political messages, uttered in the alien to us language of brutality.